

VZCZCXRO7517
PP RUEHCI
DE RUEHIL #9704/01 1451152
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 251152Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9542
INFO RUEHTA/AMEMBASSY ALMATY 9442
RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT 0600
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK 3634
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0748
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 1492
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 5374
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 6523
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 8485
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT 1269
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0794
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 3132
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 1051
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 8844
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 3507
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR 6699
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 009704

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/25/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [PK](#) [AF](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: FREE, FAIR, AND ISI: THE PML ELECTION STRATEGY

REF: ISLAMABAD 9472

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Classified By: Derived from DSCG 05-01, b and d.

11. (C/NF) Summary: According to PML Secretary General Mushahid Hussain, the party's goal in the upcoming elections is a plurality in the National Assembly. He identified urban areas in central Punjab (Lahore, Gujranwala, Faisalabad) as the chief battlegrounds, predicted a strong PML victory in Balochistan, anticipated a PML draw with the Awami National Party (ANP) and the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam Fazlur Rehman (JUI-F) in NWFP, and conceded Sindh to the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Despite assurances that the PML wanted a free and fair contest, Mushahid made clear that use of development resources, presidential campaigning, and research by the intelligence agencies were, in his view, legitimate tactics available to the PML. Mushahid argued that the PML's winning strategy was a close relationship with Musharraf coupled with denigration of the PPP and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) historic governance record. Mushahid admitted that inflation and the deteriorating situation in Waziristan posed domestic problems for the party. He called on the United States to refrain from provocative action in Iran and to do more to improve Pak-Afghan relations, claiming that both could be exploited by Islamist parties during the election. End Summary.

Electoral Strategy

12. (C/NF) In a May 25 meeting, PML Secretary General Mushahid Hussain provided a preview of his party's electoral strategy to Acting PolCouns and Poloff. Mushahid stated that at this stage he believed that the PML would be running without a formal supporting coalition and that its national strategy

would, therefore, focus principally on capturing a plurality of seats in the National Assembly. In Punjab, Mushahid predicted that the PML would do well in rural areas and in northern urban centers. The chief battleground would be the central urban districts where the party would face strong opposition from the PPP and PML-N. Winning these districts would be a priority, as they would likely determine the balance of power in the next Assembly. In Balochistan, Mushahid predicted a strong PML showing in the center and south due to its close relationship with most sardars (save the rebellious troika of Bugti, Marri, and Mengal). The party was prepared to cede northern constituencies to the JUI-F, which he believed could be bought into a coalition. In Sindh, Mushahid predicted a weak PML showing. The provincial party was divided, and despite its proactive Chief Minister, there was little hope of dividing PPP from its rural base or MQM from its urban supporters. In NWFP, Mushahid predicted an even race and possible seat adjustments between PML, ANP, and JUI-F. The goal was to divide the Islamist coalition and build a new PML-led provincial government.

13. (C/NF) Mushahid's emerging campaign strategy for the PML would place primary emphasis on the party's close ties with President Musharraf. The objective was to capture pro-Musharraf voters (youth, liberal middle class, and women), which strongly supported the President but not necessarily the party. In this vein, the PML would stress the stability that Musharraf had brought to Pakistan and the differentiation between his regime and the corruption-laden governments of the PPP and PML-N. Mushahid predicted that the PML would run a campaign that is one-third positive (focused on Musharraf's policies) and two-thirds negative (focused on the PPP and PML-N regimes' failures). Mushahid would welcome the return of these parties' leaders, Benazir

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Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, as both were easy targets for criticism. However, he predicted that neither had any real desire to return to Pakistan. Asked about potential electoral issues facing the PML, Mushahid cited inflation and the situation in Waziristan. Mushahid was convinced that price controls on basic commodities and Gen. Orakzai's appointment as governor in NWFP would be sufficient to redress these problems.

14. (C/NF) Mushahid predicted that well-publicized differences within the PML were, in fact, transitory. Party members, including the dissidents, recognized that their political futures were inextricably tied to the PML and Musharraf. Divides would be quickly repaired once the candidate selection process was formally underway, and dissidents sought tickets from the party leadership, which would control the allocation process. According to Mushahid, PML tickets would be awarded based upon "electability." The party was looking for candidates with strong ties to their district; feudal lords and tribal leaders would be strong contenders. Approximately 70 percent of the PML assembly delegation had won solid majorities, and most, save a few "troublemakers," would receive tickets. Those with slim margins of victory could be replaced.

Free and Fair Elections

15. (S/NF) Mushahid stressed that the PML wanted a free and fair contest. Its leaders were prepared to negotiate rules of the game with opposition parties and the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC). A credible electoral process was necessary to provide the new government with the popular mandate required. Several statements, during other parts of the conversation, however, called this commitment into question. For instance, Mushahid stated that the PML would use development funds to support candidates in marginal districts; the President would actively campaign on behalf of the PML; and intelligence services would continue to conduct polling of PML and PML candidate popularity in key

constituencies. (Note: All are clear violations of election law and regulations. End Note.)

Iran

¶16. (C/NF) Mushahid raised concern about the current stalemate with Iran. He asserted that hostile American action against Iran would provide Pakistan's Islamist parties with an attractive election plank, possibly swaying the NWFP contest in their favor as the Afghanistan invasion had done in 2002. Mushahid recognized that rhetoric and actions by the Iranian presidency were not helpful in resolving the nuclear impasse.

For this reason, he and others in the GOP were reaching out to more moderate elements inside Iran including the Foreign Ministry with a view to influencing positively its conduct. He cautioned the USG not/not to view the Iranian government as a monolith or to assume the current President is firmly in control.

Afghanistan

¶17. (C/NF) Mushahid expressed grave concern about the "deteriorating" relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In his view, this could be exploited by extremists on both sides to derail the constructive engagement policy which he and others had tried to build with the Karzai government. Mushahid called on the USG to do more to strengthen cooperation and contacts between the countries' intelligence services and political leadership, as we had done on the military side.

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Comment

¶18. (C/NF) Mushahid provided a realistic look at internal PML dynamics and planning as it approaches the upcoming national elections. His analysis of the PML's strengths and weaknesses with the electorate largely track with our own. A strategy emphasizing President Musharraf, without question, plays to the PML's strongest campaigner and most popular figure. Direct presidential involvement in the party's campaign remains a risky strategy, as it violates constitutional prohibitions on partisan activity by the President. Opposition parties, as they have already done, will continue to seize on such involvement to claim an unfair electoral process, to highlight their supposed democratic credentials, and perhaps ultimately to woo the liberal middle class vote that the PML's strategy is designed to capture.

End Comment.

CROCKER